

Reconstruction era had seen advancements in education, transportation, industry, and agriculture and had enabled North Carolina's population to develop beyond prewar standards. Growth was staggered amongst the various groups, however. Farmers suffered from high taxes, a lack of capital, and saw the rise of sharecropping as an alternative to slave labor. Sharecroppers enabled large plantation owners to retain ownership of their land but placed the tenants, both white and black, into a quagmire of poverty that could not be easily overcome. Industry, however, prospered through the growth of tobacco and textile products created in mills, paving the way for future growth in the 1880s. Fueling the growth of the state into the 1880s was the development of railroads connecting all parts of the state's backcountry with the coast and other states for trade and transportation.⁹⁷

Both blacks and whites made gains were made during Reconstruction. The Republicans sought to revive public education in the 1868 constitution through a series of laws. Progress, however, was slow, and, by the end of Reconstruction, most children still did not benefit from a basic education. The Freedmen's Bureau, the American Missionary Association and private donors sought to establish schools for freed blacks. They were successful in creating a number of schools and colleges designed specifically to allow African

Americans to obtain a quality education—such as the development of Shaw University in Raleigh and Gregory Normal School in Wilmington.⁹⁸

In response to losses on all fronts as white Democrats legislated Reconstruction acts into ineffectiveness, black leaders organized themselves to combat inequalities in education and business. One of the most successful challenges to Democratic efforts to minimize black interests was related to education. Wilmington's white Republican leaders encouraged local blacks to fight for their rights through consistent protests and action against Conservative Democrats in the legislature. These leaders were successful in forcing the State Board of Education to use unbiased textbooks. However, their greatest achievement was an organized campaign to suppress the Dortch Act. The act, proposed in 1883, would have allowed appropriation of tax dollars to schools based on racial divisions. Taxes collected from blacks would support black schools and vice versa for whites—creating a fear that black schools would be severely under funded. Because of a consistent lobbying campaign by black leaders, the Dortch Act was never fully enacted and was annulled by the state Supreme Court in 1886. However, Conservatives were quick to remind blacks that the promise of the act's main tenets could re-emerge in other legislation.⁹⁹

Reconstruction in Wilmington

Wilmington's experiences during Reconstruction reflected its position as the state's primary port and largest city. Soon

Brooklyn to the north, a majority black section. Wards one through three were predominantly Conservative and constituted 1,150 white voters whereas wards four and five, predominantly Republican, contained 2,300 black and white voters. Therefore, the Republican voting strength of the city was controlled with a planned Republican minority in city government. Republicans would always be in a four to six minority on the Board of Aldermen. Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails*, 172-173.

⁹⁷ Watson, *Wilmington, Port of North Carolina*, 115-117.

⁹⁸ W.N. Hartshorn and George Penniman, eds., *An Era of Progress and Promise, 1863-1910: The Religious, Moral, and Educational Development of the American Negro Since His Emancipation* (Boston: Priscilla Publishing Company, 1910), 87-92, 160.

⁹⁹ Haley, *Charles N. Hunter*, 60-61.